

# Canada's first indigenous physician? The story of Dr. O (1841–1907)

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## SUMMARY

As a physician, temperance advocate, chairman of the Grand General Indian Council of Ontario, the Supreme Chief Ranger of the Independent Order of Foresters, and mistakenly known as a Mohawk Chief, Dr. Oronhyatekha was a well-known, larger-than-life figure in North America and internationally. Since then, his memory has faded in mainstream society. Recently, however, he has re-emerged as a person of historical significance, designated as such by Parks Canada. Now the subject of the first full-length biography, co-authors Michelle Hamilton and Keith Jamieson, have separated out the true stories of his life from apocryphal ones. Although he was much more than a doctor, what follows is the story of how Oronhyatekha, a Mohawk boy baptized Peter Martin at the Six Nations of the Grand River, tenaciously pursued his dream of becoming a physician.

In 2005, Parks Canada erected a plaque near Dr. Oronhyatekha's (Burning Sky) grave at the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory and designated him a national historic person, partially based on the belief that he was the first accredited indigenous doctor in Canada. This is one of several apocryphal stories that surround him. He was not, in fact, the first. However, for a Native individual to graduate from medical school in 1867 was a remarkable achievement because of societal racial assumptions and the obstructive nature of the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA). Oronhyatekha's education began at a 1-room schoolhouse run by the New England Company (NEC), an Anglican missionary society approved of by the DIA. At age 10, he entered the Mohawk Institute, the NEC's residential school at the Grand River. The NEC missionaries included Reverend Abraham Nelles, who was first Oronhyatekha's mentor and later his nemesis. What follows is the story of how Oronhyatekha, a Mohawk boy baptized Peter Martin at the Six Nations of the Grand River territory, tenaciously pursued his dream of becoming a physician, and how he used his medical knowledge to transform the fraternal group the Independent Order of Foresters.<sup>1-3</sup>

Oronhyatekha graduated from the institute as a shoemaker's apprentice, but a chance meeting with a travelling phrenologist redirected him. Like many phrenologists, A. O'Leary toured North America, speaking at lecture halls and giving personal readings. In 1854, he was in Brantford and visited Oronhyatekha at home. After assessing his skull, O'Leary concluded Oronhyatekha should pursue further education, but also offered to take him on tour. Oronhyatekha agreed, if for no other reason than to see New York City. Eventually Oronhyatekha ended up working at the O'Leary family farm for 5 months before enrolling at Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, Massachusetts.

With Nelles's approval, Oronhyatekha registered for the 1854 winter term, but without sufficient finances, he had to work. In addition to tuition, students paid for board, laundry and fuel to heat and light their rooms. For 3 terms, Oronhyatekha received free tuition in exchange for working as the

college bell-ringer, and he took odd jobs, such as shoe-making, gardening and chopping firewood. In a much repeated quip, he later recalled that while he was paid only 40 cents per cord of wood, it kept him in bread even if he had not butter.<sup>4</sup>

After 2 years, he returned home to teach for the NEC. Pondering his future, he remembered Robert Lugger, an NEC missionary and physician, an inspiring combination. Oronhyatekha confided his career goals to Erastus Strong of the Missionary and Education Committees of the Diocese of Ohio, who visited the Grand River. Reverend Strong, a recruiter for Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, persuaded Oronhyatekha to consider Kenyon. Although Nelles disapproved, Strong also convinced the Anglican Bishop of Huron, so the NEC arranged a 3-year grant for Oronhyatekha. He enrolled in Kenyon's preparatory grammar school in 1857 and Kenyon College proper in 1858, again working odd jobs to finance his education. Though newspapers often reported Oronhyatekha graduated from Kenyon College in 1860, having completed a 4-year program in 3 years, he did not return in fall 1859. Having only £10 left, Oronhyatekha returned home to Canada to teach without finishing his degree. Nelles had unilaterally cancelled his grant based on an unsubstantiated charge that Oronhyatekha had fathered and abandoned an illegitimate child while at Kenyon.

An unlikely event pushed Oronhyatekha toward medical school and even further away from Nelles. The Grand River council chose him as its representative for the 1860 royal visit of the Prince of Wales. Legend says that the prince encouraged Oronhyatekha to join him as a student at Oxford University. In reality, it was the prince's physician, Dr. Henry Acland, who was also on tour and an Oxford professor, who made the suggestion. Acland's friendship quickly supplanted Oronhyatekha's relationship with Nelles.

Dr. Oronhyatekha later advertised himself as Oxford-trained, an exaggeration as he spent only 1 month registered. When he arrived in February 1862, Acland took him under his wing, but Nelles soon interfered. When the NEC in England contacted Nelles about Oronhyatekha attending Oxford, he was incensed. He accused Oronhyatekha of embezzling Grand River council funds, even though he had been earlier acquitted, and repeated his charge of abandoning his child. There was also the matter of his supposed expulsion from Kenyon. After a late-night concert, Oronhyatekha's entire class skipped morning recitations to sleep in. Kenyon's president expelled the entire class unless they signed a document promising to abide by all rules in the future. Most students, including Oronhyatekha, signed the document and finished the term.

A former Governor General of Canada, Sir Edmund Head, wrote to David Thorburn, an Indian agent at the Grand River, inquiring about Nelles's charges. Thorburn

replied that he knew of nothing. After much discussion, the NEC ultimately ignored Nelles's charges and disagreed with the revocation of Oronhyatekha's grant while at Kenyon. Thus supported by the NEC, Oronhyatekha enrolled at Oxford's St. Edmund Hall in May 1862. But the spectre of his expulsion persisted. Just over 1 month to the day that Oronhyatekha enrolled, he sailed home to clear his name.

Why was Nelles so adamant about Oronhyatekha's moral character, to the point that he destroyed his chances at Oxford, despite his patronage by Acland, British NEC officials, and the former Governor General of Canada? According to Oronhyatekha, Nelles strongly believed that no Mohawk could succeed without his guidance, and acting without it angered him. It would also undermine Nelles's authority. Years later, Daniel Wilson who taught Oronhyatekha at University College, Toronto, explained that he possessed a sense of firmness and self-reliance that discomfited missionaries. Indigenous peoples were treated like children; if individuals showed independence, they were labelled rebellious rather than ambitious.<sup>5</sup> With continued NEC support, Oronhyatekha entered the Toronto School of Medicine in 1863. A few months later Nelles raised the question of Oronhyatekha's supposed immorality again, but it did not alter the NEC's decision. Oronhyatekha wrote his final M.B. exams in 1866 and enrolled in the M.D., which required a thesis. He sat the license exam administered by the newly established provincial College of Physicians and Surgeons and registered on May 22, 1867.

Unfortunately, Dr. Oronhyatekha left behind no records of his practice, but most 19th century doctors ran general practices that included minor surgery and delivering babies. In 1873, the DIA appointed him as consulting physician for Tyendinaga, the home of his wife Ellen Hill. This appointment was controversial because Nelles's charges still had not yet dissipated, but it was greased by Dr. Oronhyatekha's friendship with John A. Macdonald, Prime Minister of Canada. Still surrounded by controversy in 1874, Dr. Oronhyatekha resigned. By late 1875 he had been appointed DIA physician for the Oneida of the Thames, and opened a practice in downtown London, Ontario.

In London, he joined the Independent Order of Foresters (IOF), a fraternal organization that offered its members life insurance. First elected medical examiner, Dr. Oronhyatekha quickly moved through the ranks to become the Supreme Chief Ranger in 1881, a position he held until his death. He used his expertise to tighten membership medical exams, and as new tests became ubiquitous, he incorporated them as well. Thus he reduced the risk borne by the IOF by accepting only the healthiest applicants. Of all the fraternal insurance plans of the time, under Dr. Oronhyatekha that of the IOF became the largest and most successful.

Until recently, Dr. Oronhyatekha has been remembered as Canada's first indigenous physician. Dr. Allan Sherwin's recent biography of the Mississauga doctor, P.E. Jones, however, demonstrates that he received his license 6 months earlier. Nevertheless, Dr. Oronhyatekha's attainment of 2 degrees in the mid-19th century, a time when racism and the restrictions of the DIA hindered many from higher education, is remarkable and should not be dismissed simply because he was not the first.

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**Competing interests:** None declared.

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### **CORRECTION: A RETROSPECTIVE QUALITY CONTROL STUDY OF GOALS OF CARE DESIGNATION IN GERIATRIC TRAUMA PATIENTS**

The abstract by Taheri and colleagues<sup>1</sup> published in the 2016 Trauma Association of Canada Annual Scientific Meeting abstract supplement was missing the names of several authors and had an incorrect affiliation. A corrected version of the supplement is available on our website at [canjsurg.ca](http://canjsurg.ca). We apologize for the error.

### **Reference**

1. Taheri A, Min B, Fawcett V, et al. A retrospective quality control study of goals of care designation in geriatric trauma patients. *Can J Surg* 2016;59(3 Suppl 1):S23.